"Excesses are not permitted": Mass Terror and Stalinist Governance in the Late 1930s

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Stalinist "mass operations" were repressive actions directed against categories rather than individuals. Lavrenty Beria, who certainly knew something about such things, characterized them as "group arrests or exiles without a differentiated approach to each arrested or exiled person."[1] Often called "extra-legal" (*vnesudebnye*), sentences in mass operations were typically imposed by troikas, tribunals, police "conferences," or other nonjudicial bodies, for real or potential "offenses" not covered in the formal law and often without the participation or presence of procurators, defense lawyers, or even the accused.[2] Appearing for the first time during the Civil War of 1918–21, they were used when the regime felt itself constrained by the requirements of the judicial system or under threat (during war scares or after assassinations), during transformational campaigns (collectivization of agriculture), or when the targets had committed no chargeable crime but were nevertheless considered dangerous as a category.

From mid-1937 to nearly the end of 1938, the Soviet secret police carried out a mass terror against ordinary citizens. This "kulak operation," as it was called, accounted for about half of all executions during the "Great Purges" of 1937–38. By the time it ended in November 1938, 767,397 persons had been sentenced by summary troikas; 386,798 of them to death and the remainder to terms in GULAG camps.[3] The process saw systematic, physical tortures (approved personally by Stalin) of a savage nature and scale, fabricated

[1]"Prikaz No. 762: O poriadke osushchestvleniia postanovleniia SNK SSSR i VKP(b) ot 17 noiabria 1938 goda," 26 November 1938, Tsentral'nyi arkhiv Federal'noi sluzhby bezopasnosti Rossiiiskoi Federatsii (TsA FSB), f. 100. op. 1, por. 1, l. 260.

[2]On the Stalinist judicial system see Peter Solomon, *Soviet Criminal Justice Under Stalin* (New York, 1996); Gábor Tamás Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications and Soviet Complications: Social Tensions and Political Conflicts in the USSR, 1933–1953* (New York, 1991); and idem, "Soviet Officialdom and Political Evolution: Judiciary Apparatus and Penal Policy in the 1930s," *Theory and Society* 2 (1984). See also "O vnesudebnykh organakh," *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, no. 19 (1989): 80–82.

[3]TsA FSB collection of documents, and published in A. I. Kokurin and N. V. Petrov, *GULAG (Glavnoe upravlenie lagerei), 1917–1960* (Moscow, 2000), 433. Although many people who were not kulaks fell victim to this operation, we shall here retain the title "kulak operation." This was the contemporary usage in party and police documents and serves to distinguish it from other mass terror campaigns. Other "mass operations" in 1937–38 targeted persons of non-Soviet citizenship or national heritage including Poles, Germans, Latvians, Koreans, Chinese, and others,

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conspiracies, false charges, and mass executions.[4] As such, the kulak operation of 1937–38 must be counted among the major massacres of a bloody twentieth century.

Scholarship on this operation is only beginning; we did not even know of its existence until 1992. Since then, a number of scholars have sought clues in the archives to this remarkably cruel and brutal event. At this moment, there is a rough consensus on several points. All agree, within a narrow range, on the number of victims. There is also general agreement that the vast majority of them were ordinary people, rather than members of the elite, and that most of them were selected by category or background rather than through denunciation, investigation, or because of any particular act they committed. The victims seem to have been politically or socially marginal types already somehow stigmatized: common criminals, veterans of the White Army in the Civil War, kulaks, "hooligans," and various "socially dangerous elements" as defined by the regime. Finally, the mass operations seem so different from other elements of the 1930s terror that "it may be that the events that we label 'the Great Purges' may best be understood not as a single phenomenon but as a number of related but discrete phenomena, each susceptible of specific historical explanation."[5] Beyond agreement on these points, however, scholars differ considerably on the causes, initiation, conduct, and meaning of the kulak operation.

Many historians see the terror of the 1930s, including the mass operations, as centrally directed and planned.[6] Oleg V. Khlevniuk, the leading Russian expert on the terror, calls it "unquestionably an action directed from the center, planned and administered from Moscow."[7] He sees the onset of terror as a sharp break with the preceding 1933–36 period

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accounting for an additional 335,513 sentences (including 247,157 executions). For space considerations, and because these "national operations" had different targets, causes, and procedures, they are not treated here. For information on them see Terry Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (December 1998): 22; A. E. Gur'ianov, ed., *Repressii protiv poliakov i pol'skikh grazhdan* (Moscow, 1997), 33; and I. L. Shcherbakova, ed., *Nakazannyi narod: Repressii protiv rossiiskikh nemtsev* (Moscow, 1999), 44.

[4]In the course of this research, we have located the famous 1939 Stalin directive on "physical methods" of interrogation mentioned by Khrushchev in his 1956 Secret Speech (see I. V. Kurilov, N. N. Mikhailov, and V. P. Naumov, eds., *Reabilitatsiia: Politicheskie protsessy 30–50-kh godov* [Moscow, 1991], 40). It is in TsA FSB, f. 100. op. 1, por. 6, ll. 1–2 (second series). Dated 27 July 1939 (not 10 July, according to Khrushchev). it is a telegram from Stalin to party secretaries in all regions. It refers to a still unfound 1937 Central Committee directive authorizing physical methods in exceptional circumstances. Interestingly, the 1939 telegram was written after N. I. Ezhov's fall, and in a passage not mentioned by Khrushchev it accuses Ezhov's men of excessive torture, "converting an exception into a rule."

[5]Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London, 2000), 258. See J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: the Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (New York, 1985), 202–3, for a similar observation.

[6]For examples of Western studies that have emphasized a Stalin-focused, planned, and centralized terror see Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Thirties*, rev. ed. (New York, 1973); O. V. Khlevniuk, *1937-i: Stalin, NKVD i sovetskoe obshchestvo* (Moscow, 1992); and David J. Nordlander, "Origins of a Gulag capital: Magadan and Stalinist control in the early 1930s," *Slavic Review* 57 (Winter 1998). For views stressing lack of planning and limits on central control see J. Arch Getty and Roberta Thompson Manning, eds., *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives* (New York, 1993); Robert Weinberg, "Purge and Politics in the Periphery: Birobidzhan in 1937," *Slavic Review* 52 (Spring 1993); Roberta T. Manning, "Government in the Soviet Countryside in the Stalinist Thirties: The Case of Belyi Raion in 1937," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, 301; and Robert Thurston, *Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941* (New Haven, 1996).

[7]O. Khlevniuk, "The Objectives of the Great Terror, 1937–1938," in *Soviet History, 1917–53: Essays in Honour of R. W. Davies*, ed. Julian Cooper, Maureen Perrie, and E. A. Rees (London, 1995), 165. See also O. V. Khlevniuk, "Les mechanismes de la 'Grande Terreur': des années 1937–1938 au Turkmenistan," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 39, no. 1–2 (1998).

of judicial relaxation and relative liberalism and finds its origins in Stalin's growing fear of a coming war. Khlevniuk sees a Stalin eager to prevent a Fifth Column in his rear and launching a planned, calculated preemptive strike at anyone who might somehow oppose him or even waver during a wartime crisis. As the number of victims constantly increased, the operation spun out of control. Khlevniuk believes that Stalin anticipated, even counted on, the excesses of the mass terror which were integral parts of his plan and system of governance.

Paul Hagenloh and David Shearer also see the kulak operation as centrally driven, but interpret it as a continuation of radical attempts by the regime to police society in the 1930s, rather than as a sharp break with previous practice.[8] They describe a kind of rural crescendo to a series of urban police sweeps and dragnets in the 1930s that targeted generally nonpolitical criminal and marginal types the regime wanted to destroy: common criminals, speculators, thieves, thugs, passport violators, and a variety of people the regime labelled "socially dangerous."

Other historians emphasize not planned calculation or intentional policy but fear and panic on the part of the top leadership. Robert Thurston, like Khlevniuk, sees the kulak operation as a sharp break with previous, relatively liberal penal policies, but concludes that it was not part of any plan but rather a sudden explosion of fear and madness on the part of the leadership.[9] Roberta Manning similarly emphasizes anxiety at domestic economic downturns at a time of foreign threat. Spy scares and fears of domestic military and political plots created an atmosphere in which the top leadership panicked and in which local attitudes and local party officials played an important role in escalating a hysterical terror.[10] Gábor Rittersporn has described conflicts within the leadership about how to govern and about whom to identify as the "enemy," noting the willingness of Stalinist leaders to accept and believe in conspiracies of all kinds.[11]

In this article, we shall look at the "kulak operation" through newly available party and police archival sources. The evidence presented below suggests that understanding the kulak operation purely as planned and centrally directed violence, without taking into account power contests between central and regional bodies, tells only half the story. This article seeks neither to minimize Stalin's clear role as author of the terror, nor to posit a terror "from below," but rather to highlight the complexities and contraditions of the structure of Stalinist politics.

Specifically, we shall suggest that the kulak operation indeed represented a sudden and sharp break with previous practice—sharper than usually thought—and overturned policies

[8]Paul Hagenloh, "'Socially Harmful Elements' and the Great Terror," in *Stalinism: New Directions*, 286–308; David Shearer, "Crime and Social Disorder in Stalin's Russia—A Reassessment of the Great Retreat and the Origins of Mass Repression," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 39, no. 1–2 (1998).

[9]Thurston, *Life and Terror*, 62.

[10]Roberta T. Manning, "Massovaia operatsiia protiv 'kulakov i prestupnykh' elementov: Apogei Velikoi Chistki na Smolenshchine," in *Stalinizm v rossiiskoi provintsii: Smolenskie arkhivnye dokumenty v prochtenii zarubezhnykh i rossiiskikh istorikov*, ed. E. V. Kodin (Smolensk, 1999), 230–54; Roberta T. Manning, "The Great Purges in a Rural District: Belyi Raion," in *Stalinist Terror*, 168–97.

[11]Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications*; idem, "The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s," in *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath—Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin*, ed. Nicholas Lampert and G. T. Rittersporn (London, 1992).

confirmed only weeks before. Although as a "mass operation" it resembled previous police sweeps of social marginals, it had its own unique political features. It happened at a time when such mass operations were being discouraged, and were on the wane. Badly planned, carelessly and abruptly implemented, it came as a result of domestic fears arising in the first half of 1937.

Most important, we shall see that local officials played a part in the kulak operation that goes beyond their presumed roles as mere servants, resisters, or overfulfillers of central plans. Local and regional officials have often been seen as restraining forces on Stalin's violent plans. Long ago, Merle Fainsod wrote that local bureaucratic inefficiencies made a totalitarian system more bearable. Similarly, Oleg Khlevniuk has recently noted that interactions between administrative and regional interests "allowed for a reduction of the destructive consequences" of the system. Others have cited various cases of overt resistance in the regional bureaucracy to Stalinist terror.[12] The present article shows, however, that local officials also helped to instigate and shape the kulak operation; the evidence suggests that at times they were active players in the process. Stalin and his local secretaries seem to have had an implicit (and sometimes explicit) dialogue and negotiation on this matter, and Stalin may not have been the one most eager to once again launch a campaign-style operation. Once he did, he attempted to supervise the operation in the same way he did the police terror against the elite. Like other Stalinist campaigns, the operation was far from centralized and quickly degenerated into the kind of chaos, confusion, and contradiction endemic to Stalinist campaign mode, but there is little reason to think that Stalin sought or expected the mess he created.

Peter Solomon, in his study of Stalinist criminal justice, combined an emphasis on Stalin's intentions with an analysis of the environment and structure in which he functioned. He showed how in the 1930s Stalin was working to consolidate a modern legal order with reliable courts, respect for laws, and predictable punishments all in the interests of a strong centralized state (and of his personal power), but was limited by two things: the interference of local politicians in the legal system and courts in their territories, and his own resort to military-style campaigns to carry out specific policies: industrialization, collectivization, and mass operations being examples.[13] With the attendant mobilizations, combative slogans, "offensives" on various "fronts," local battles and initiatives, and wild, uneven, and chaotic implementation, operating in campaign mode frustrated rational centralization and the creation of a well-defined and clearly mapped political and social order.

Although we frequently associate Stalinist campaigns with centralized control and initiative, the opposite was true. Campaigns were unleashed rather than administered, and because they were heavy-handed and blunt instruments, they frequently did as much damage to rational policy planning (and to Stalin's power) as they accomplished his goals. They caught up the "innocent" (middle peasants, for example) as well as the "guilty" (kulaks) and

[12]Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA, 1958), 450; O. Khlevniuk, "Stalinism and the Stalin Period after the 'Archival Revolution,'" *Kritika* 2 (Spring 2001): 325; A. V. Afanasev, ed., *Oni ne molchali* (Moscow, 1991); Solomon, *Criminal Justice*, chap. 7.

[13]See Solomon, *Criminal Justice*, esp. chaps. 4 and 5. For a discussion of similar centralizing trends in many fields that also came at the expense of local prerogatives see J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939* (New Haven, 1999), pt. 1.

their uncontrolled, militant persecutions tended to alienate potential supporters caught up in the mayhem. They also inevitably required delegation of power to local officials, who carried out the actual campaigns on the ground. For Stalin, operating in campaign mode meant ceding central control, inviting chaos, and trusting the fate and reputation of the regime to far-off local authorities. When sufficient progress had been made, or when things had gone too far, it was necessary to restore order and reign in the chaos, and much of prewar Stalinist history is told in the flow and ebb, the launching and restraining of campaigns. Thus, for example, cleaning up the "campaign justice" of the collectivization period and restoring centralized order required checking the power of local political officials.[14] Stalin needed them; they were the regime's representatives to most of the population and were the ones to carry out Moscow's policies. But the structure of power in the system meant that Stalin's power was inversely proportional to that of the local party leaders. Stalin could only centralize and strengthen his own hand by curbing their authority.

The "Great Purges" were in full swing by the middle of 1937. Two major show trials were followed by wave after wave of arrests in the Soviet elite. Former oppositionists, party leaders, and economic administrators were hardest hit, and in June a widespread purge of the military began with the arrests of Marshal M. N. Tukhachevskii and most of the high command. To this point, however, the bulk of the arrests were of leading cadres rather than ordinary citizens. The first sign that something different was in the wind came early in July 1937, when Stalin sent a telegram to all provincial and national republic party committees advising them that "a large number of former kulaks and criminals" in the provinces "are the chief instigators of all sorts of crimes." He ordered provincial leaders to identify and arrest the "most hostile" among them for processing by troikas and immediate punishment. Later that month, this party decision was supplemented by a secret police (NKVD) directive, Operational Order No. 447, which specified procedures for grouping victims into Category 1 (72,950, to be shot) or Category 2 (194,000, to be sent to labor camps) and gave target figures in each category for every province and republic.[15] Order No. 447 specified responsibilities and procedures for the conduct of the operation down to the duties of small "operational groups" making the actual arrests, the kinds and flow of paperwork to be produced, the memberships of the troikas, the signatures required, the disposition of files, timetables, provisions for modifying the target figures, and the budgetary allocations. Order No. 447 thus seems to demonstrate Politburo operational planning and concern for centralized control and micromanagement.

Although mass operations were common in the Stalin period, the kulak operation of 1937 nevertheless was not part of a long-range plan or process. If we situate it in relation to Stalinist penal policy in the 1930s, we shall see that it was instead a sudden reversal of a five-year trend to reduce, if not abolish, mass political operations. Moreover, confusion and

[14]The phrase "campaign justice" is from Solomon, *Criminal Justice*, chap. 3.

[15]"Ob operatsii po repressirovaniiu byvshikh kulakov, ugolovnikov i drugikh antisovetskikh elementov," 30 July 1937, TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 1, ll. 203–17. Order No. 447 and Stalin's telegram were first published in edited form in *Trud*, 4 June 1992. Order No. 447 recently has been published in Kokurin and Petrov, *GULAG*, 96–104. A partial English translation appears in Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*, 473–80.

improvization before and during the operation suggest both a lack of short-term planning and an inability to efficiently centralize administration.

During the collectivization of agriculture in 1929–33, mass repression of peasant resisters (often labeled "kulaks") had been the norm, as sweeps of the countryside resulted in wholesale arrests, executions, and exiles to distant regions. This "campaign justice" precluded any meaningful legality or individual judicial approach to criminality. Recalling the combative times of the Civil War, these mobilizations against categories of the party's enemies had an undifferentiated, military character.

But Stalin realized that campaign methods carried a price, which we today would call collateral damage. The root-and-branch approach of collectivization tended to alienate potential supporters among the population because it caught up large numbers of bystanders along with the regime's targets. When the regime operated in campaign mode, the resulting chaos impeded efforts by Stalin to regularize and centralize administration. When it had become clear that the battle for collectivization was won, the Stalinists thus sought to abolish mass operations and to stop the promiscuous use of punitive sanctions by local and nonjudicial bodies. As early as July 1931 the party ordered that all death sentences imposed by the secret police (OGPU) be confirmed by the Politburo, and the following spring removed the OGPU's right to judge criminal cases of exiled peasants, transferring them to the regular courts.[16] In February 1933 the Politburo established a commission that recommended a substantial decrease in prison populations to be effected by early releases of many convicts and wholesale release of those "illegally arrested."[17]

These measures were consolidated and extended in an important party-state decree of 8 May 1933, which official spokesmen would refer to often in the next five years. Although it is usually cited for its call to reduce prison populations by half, its real message was the end of mass operations. Signed by Stalin and Molotov, this directive stated that "the moment has come ... when we are no longer in need of mass repression." Blaming local officials for an "orgy of arrests," Stalin and Molotov argued that mass violence was inefficient and counterproductive. Repression was not to be ended, but rather focused and "streamlined":

> These comrades do not understand that the method of mass, disorderly arrests—if this can be considered a method—represents, in light of the new situation, only liabilities which diminish the authority of Soviet power. They do not understand that making arrests ought to be limited and carried out under the strict control of appropriate organs. They do not understand that arrests must be directed solely against active enemies of Soviet power. ... They do not understand that if this kind of action took on a massive character to any extent, it could nullify the influence of our party in the countryside.[18]

[16]"Voprosy OGPU," 10 July 1931, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 3, d. 840, l. 9; A. I. Akulov, "Tsirkuliar," 31 March 1932, TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 1, l. 88.

[17]"Postanovlenie Politbiuro TsK VKP(b) ot 8.III.33g.: O razgruzke mest lisheniia svobody," 8 March 1933, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 14, ll. 89–92.

[18]"Instruktsiia vsem partiino-sovetskim rabotnikam i vsem organam OGPU i procuratury," RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 922, ll. 50–55.

The day before the 8 May 1933 decree was published, the Politburo had forbidden secret police (OGPU) troikas from passing any more death sentences at all,[19] and according to the 8 May 1933 decree, police agencies could make arrests only with the preliminary sanction of a state procurator. Such a rule would make mass repressive operations practically impossible insofar as it required approval of *individual* arrests by an individual procurator.[20] It was the sudden abandonment of this procuratorial sanction that made the kulak operation possible, and it was its restoration that ended it.[21]

Another passage in the 8 May 1933 decree reveals a constituency behind mass operations:

> Demands for mass expulsions from the countryside and for the use of harsh forms of repression continue to come in from a number of provinces (*oblast'*). ... It looks as if these comrades are willing to replace and are already replacing the political work conducted among the masses ... with administrative-chekist "operations" of organs of the GPU and the regular police.[22]

Many local officials may have been at least as quick to turn to repression as their boss in Moscow. It is not difficult to imagine that later, in 1937, local party leaders, fearful that they might be accused as "enemies of the people" in the spiralling terror of that year, would have found it convenient to launch repressive campaigns against others in order to deflect the witch hunt's heat away from themselves. But Stalin's May 1933 circular suggests that even before 1936–38, local party leaders were not reluctant to use terror as a tool of government, even when their boss, for his own tactical reasons, was leaning away from it. Provincial party secretaries faced the brunt of anti-Bolshevik resistance on the ground, while trying to respond to unmeetable demands from Moscow on everything from agricultural deliveries and industrial production to construction or the dissemination of propaganda. In the political space they inhabited, some of them may have found it easier to crush categories of people with "administrative-chekist" methods than to convince them with "political work," regardless of Moscow's current policy. For local leaders persecution was "a tool of rural administration."[23] In the structure of the Stalinist system, regional officials were not timid or liberal

[19]"O troikakh OGPU," 7 May 1933, ibid., l. 16.

[20]Throughout much of the 1930s, A. Ia. Vyshinskii (who would become Procurator of the USSR) argued for enforcement of procuratorial sanction for arrests, partly as a matter of his understanding of law and partly as a bureaucratic issue to strengthen the authority of his agency. His struggle for procuratorial sanction made him effectively an opponent of mass repressive operations, but not necessarily of repression in principle. On Vyshinskii see Solomon, *Criminal Justice*, chap. 5; and Thurston, *Life and Terror*, chap. 1. On differences between Iagoda and Vyshinskii see S. Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation' in the Soviet Union in the 1930's," *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 39, no. 1–2 (1998); and Shearer, "Crime and Social Disorder."

[21]In August 1937, USSR Procurator Vyshinskii suspended procuratorial approval for arrests in the mass operations, making them legally possible (A. F. Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu: Iz istorii politicheskikh repressii v TASSR v gody "ezhovshchiny"* [Kazan, 1999], 10). Restoration of the sanction in November 1938 effectively ended the operations ("O prokurature SSSR," *Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992).

[22]"Instruktsiia vsem partiino-sovetskim rabotnikam i vsem organam OGPU i procuratury," 8 May 1933, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 922, ll. 50.

[23]Solomon, *Criminal Justice*, 127.

politicians, always with the population's interests at heart.[24] Nor do they fit the heroic mantle given them in post-Stalin Soviet treatments, which exalted many of them simply because Stalin later killed or jailed them.

In July 1933 an all-union USSR Procuracy was established for the first time to supervise "the legality and rightness of actions undertaken by the OGPU, by the police, by the department of criminal investigation and by corrective-labor institutions."[25] The most important institutional change limiting the ability of local and nonjudicial bodies to arrest, try, and execute was the formation of an all-union People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD SSSR). Taken in February 1934 on Stalin's motion, this decision abolished the former secret police (OGPU) and folded some of its functions into the new NKVD, but without any judicial powers. According to the new regulations, the NKVD did not have the power to pass death sentences or to inflict extralegal "administrative" punishments of more than five years' exile.[26] As Stalin's lieutenant L. M. Kaganovich put it, "the reorganization of the OGPU means that, as we are now in more normal times, we can judge through the courts and not resort to extrajudicial repression as we have until now."[27] New NKVD chief G. G. Iagoda, perhaps wistfully, told a secret police conference that the era of mass repression had ended, and that any calls to renew it were now an "enemy theory."[28] In January 1935, Stalin wrote to A. Ia. Vyshinskii that policing measures should now be "gradual, without shocks" and should be carried out "without extra administrative enthusiasm."[29]

Later that year, there was even a softening of policy toward kulaks. In December 1934 a circular to all NKVD chiefs and procurators allowed the employment of exiles in organizations not having a defense character, and their children were permitted to enroll in educational institutions. Local NKVD chiefs were specifically ordered to inform the exiles of their new rights. A Politburo decree one week later abolished all restrictions on admission to higher educational institutions for persons heretofore excluded because of social origins or previous electoral disenfranchisement.[30]

Despite the changes in top-level policy, certain kinds of mass campaigns continued, albeit on a local and sharply reduced scale; the regime could not live without them. Following the assassination of S. M. Kirov in December 1934, several waves of police action

[24]Lynne Viola, "The Campaign to Eliminate the Kulak as a Class, Winter 1929–1930: A Reevaluation of the Legislation," *Slavic Review* 45 (Fall 1986), was the first to document the inclination of local leaders to use force in the countryside regardless of Moscow's current policy.

[25]"Ob uchrezhdenii Procuratura SSSR" (Politburo resolution), RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 925, l. 47.

[26]"Ob organizatsii Soiuznogo narkomata vnutrennykh del" (Politburo resolution), ibid., d. 939, l. 2. Stalin participated personally in the drafting of these regulations (Politburo resolution of 1 April 1934, ibid., d. 943, l. 10). The decree was published in *Izvestiia*, 11 July 1934. The power to punish administratively up to five years was, of course, no small thing. Between 1935 and the end of 1938, 112,000 persons were so sentenced by the NKVD's Special Board (Osoboe soveshchanie). See Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 9401, op. 1, d. 4157, ll. 201–3, 205.

[27]RGASPI, f. 17, op. 165, d. 47, l. 3.

[28]TsA FSB, collection of documents.

[29]Stalin's notes on Vyshinskii memo, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 2, d. 155, l. 66.

[30]"Tsirkuliar," 23 December 1935, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 974, ll. 12, 108; "Postanovlenie Tsentral'nogo Ispolnitel'nogo Komiteta i Soveta Narodnykh Komissarov SSSR o prieme v vysshie uchebnye zavedeniia i tekhnikumy," 29 December 1935, ibid., l. 137.

deported thousands from Leningrad according to social category. In 1935–36, police troikas conducted sweeps against various categories of criminals and violators of residence restrictions. In early 1935 the Ukrainian NKVD conducted a mass deportation of suspicious populations from border regions.[31] Nevertheless, these operations were seen as exceptions to the general policy, and when they took place, central party and state officials criticized their implementation. The post-Kirov assassination deportations were largely limited to Leningrad and tapered off rather quickly; already in May 1935, Vyshinskii was writing to Stalin complaining about how their wholesale character was producing a mass of procedural complaints.[32] The April 1935 border deportations in Ukraine brought a protest from USSR NKVD chief Iagoda, who criticized his Ukrainian subordinates for the operation. NKVD Ukraine chief Balitskii defended himself by noting that the operation was ordered by regional officials, in this case the Ukrainian party Central Committee.

Local authorities had difficulty adjusting to the new situation. In May 1936 a special commission of the Orgburo complained about ongoing local violations of individual legality and procuratorial supervision in which prisoners were not being released when freed by procurators. Recalling the 8 May 1933 decree against local mass repression, the report blasted local party committees who pushed the courts into mass repression that discredited Soviet power.[33]

Mass operations in the 1933–36 period were on a dramatically reduced scale, incomparable with those of the preceding period. According to secret police data, arrests for "counterrevolutionary insurrection" (a common charge in mass operations, including the subsequent kulak operation) fell from 135,000 in 1933 to 2,517 in 1936.[34] Each year from 1933 to 1936, the number of both political and nonpolitical arrests declined. In this period there was a three-fold decrease in arrests for "political," counterrevolutionary crimes (Article 58 of the criminal code) from 283,029 in 1933 to 91,127 in 1936. Arrests for nonpolitical offenses fell five-fold in the same period, from 222,227 in 1933 to 40,041 in 1936.[35] Despite the continuation of certain restricted mass operations, the time of mass NKVD arrests was clearly on the wane.

As recently as March 1937, only four months before Stalin's announcement of the mass kulak operation, NKVD chief N. I. Ezhov had denounced such operations in a speech to the Central Committee, noting that "the practice of mass arrests ... is now harmful." He noted that the Central Committee had criticized them since 1933 because such mass sweeps were ineffective at identifying real enemies.[36] At a subsequent conference of senior NKVD chiefs on 19 March 1937, he again recalled the decree of 8 May 1933 ("You all know about

[31]See Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing," 848–49; and RGASPI, f. 558, op. 2, d. 155, ll. 66–67.

[32]Vyshinskii letter to Stalin and Molotov, 13 May 1935, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 886, ll. 29–31.

[33]"Proekt zakrytogo pis'ma TsK VKP(b) partiinym organizatsiiam o rabote sudebnykh, prokurorskikh i sledstvennykh organov," RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 83, ll. 3–19.

[34]TsA FSB, collection of documents.

[35]"O kolichestve osuzhdennykh po delam organov NKVD za 1930–1936 gody," GARF, f. 9401, op. 1, d. 4157, ll. 201–5. For analysis of these data see J. Arch Getty, Gábor T. Rittersporn, and V. N. Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence," *American Historical Review* 98 (October 1993). See also Thurston, *Life and Terror*, 9–12.

[36]Ezhov's speech to the February-March 1937 Central Committee Plenum, 2 March 1937, in *Voprosy istorii*, 1994, no. 10:15.

it.") in which there was "sharp criticism" of mass arrests. Ezhov complained that in the preceding two years, 80 percent of all NKVD arrests had been of nonpolitical common criminals: thieves, hooligans, and the like. Criminal arrests were to be the provenance of regular courts. If they had to be done, such criminal arrests were the business of the regular police (*militsiia*), not the political police (GUGB NKVD).[37]

Everything seems to indicate that Stalin and his lieutenants worked to expand their power at the expense of local leaders, to centralize decision-making power by reducing local authorities' use of repression, and to modernize the judicial system by making it more uniform, transparent, and predictable. The eruption of mass repression in the kulak order of mid-1937 seems therefore not to have been part of any long-term planning or policy. Stalin had gone out of his way to identify himself with those who opposed mass operations; this would have been poor strategy indeed had he planned to launch one. How, then, did the kulak operation come about?

One reason had to do with local party officials' fear of "dangerous" political sentiments among the populations of their territories. Party and police had worried that the new 1936 Stalin Constitution would strengthen "enemy elements" by extending voting rights to persons previously disenfranchised (former White Army officers, tsarist officials, kulaks, and others). In 1935, NKVD chief Iagoda complained about giving voting rights to "anti-Soviet elements" or releasing them from exile,[38] and during public discussions of the new Stalin Constitution that year, party leaders were alarmed by statements like that from Grigorii Gorbunov, a peasant from Ukraine and a former Socialist Revolutionary, who said "the Constitution permits the organization of parties apart from the VKP(b). Accordingly, we are organizing our party, our press, and we will carry out our line."[39]

It was not until 1937 that the matter became a pressing concern for regional officials, because that was the year of the first real elections to the national Supreme Soviet. Those elections were to be contested (multiple candidates for each seat) and by secret ballot.[40] Regional party bosses perhaps had few illusions about the Supreme Soviet leading to a dangerous democratization of the Soviet system, and although they would complain to Stalin of the danger of hostile candidates being elected locally, it is impossible to imagine that Stalin and the Politburo would have tolerated the election of many anti-Soviet candidates.

But the right of previously banned organizations (particularly religious ones) to exist, restoring voting rights to groups hostile to the regime, and allowing open campaigning not only invited denunciations of Bolshevik policy. It encouraged rumors about everything from major policy changes or wars to purported assassinations and uprisings. We know how sensitive and fearful the Bolsheviks were about the spread of hostile stories, songs, poems, and conversations, and about the possible political effects of rumors.[41] Rumors could cause

[37]"Doklad N. I. Ezhova ob itogakh Plenuma TsK VKP(b). Stenogramma sobraniia aktiva GUGB NKVD SSSR," 19 March 1937 (TsA FSB, uncatalogued folder, ll. 40–42).

[38]GARF, f. 9479, op. 1, d. 29, ll. 10–15. See also Shearer, "Crime and Social Disorder," 136–37.

[39]GARF, f. 3316, op. 8, d. 222, l. 72, 73. For other examples see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda, and Dissent, 1934–1941* (New York, 1997), chap. 6.

[40]J. Arch Getty, "State and Society Under Stalin: Constitutions and Elections in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 50 (Spring 1991).

[41]See J. A. Getty, "Afraid of Their Shadows: The Bolshevik Recourse to Terror, 1932–1938," in *Stalinismus vor dem Zweiten Weltkrieg Neue Wege der Forschung*, ed. Manfred Hildermeier and Elisabeth Mueller-Luckner (Munich,

trouble and could even escalate into political movements. Bolshevik officials were chronically anxious about potential political trouble in the countryside and habitually attached political meanings to a variety of events. One local representative of the Central Committee Rural Department reported to Moscow on a collective farmer who had murdered his children, claiming that he had no means to feed them. When an investigation showed that the father did indeed have food, the official concluded that the affair had antiregime "political meaning." In another case, the sloppy police investigation of a fire thought to have been set by a collective farmer "did not uncover the possible counterrevolutionary role of religious believers and sectarians."[42] Local party bosses found the possibility of a real electoral campaign dangerous to their control of the population, and they made the case to Stalin.

The promise of the new Stalin Constitution to restore civil rights to previously repressed groups was taken by many such victims as a kind of amnesty. In particular, kulaks who had been exiled to distant regions during collectivization began to return to their former homes, either at the expiration of their sentence or by simply escaping from their places of detention. In the early months of 1937, worried local NKVD chiefs began reporting to Moscow on the numbers of these returnees appearing in their provinces in connection with the new Constitution. They asked for guidance on what to do with them and inquired whether previous NKVD regulations and restrictions on kulaks remained in force.[43] The new Constitution also promised religious freedom, and heretofore persecuted believers and priests took it as a signal permitting some level of religious activism. Thus the Stalin Constitution, certainly without its authors meaning for it to, caused a resurgence of the two aspects of the anti-Bolshevik nexus in the village: kulaks and religion.

The February–March 1937 Central Committee plenum has rightly been seen as an intensification of the terror. It saw the arraignment and arrest of N. I. Bukharin and A. I. Rykov, and authorized the NKVD to intensify the hunt for "enemies of the people." Since the summer of 1936—the time of the first Moscow show trial—terror had been on the rise but had been directed against former oppositionists and other members of the party elite; it did not yet involve mass arrests among the general population. Indeed, Ezhov's speech criticizing *mass* operations (and citing the 8 May 1933 decree against them), took place at the same February-March plenum that gave new impulse to the weeding out of *elite* "enemies."

However, seeds of the mass kulak operation are found not in Ezhov's or Stalin's speeches to the February–March 1937 plenum, but in a less famous one given by A. A. Zhdanov on the upcoming party elections of summer 1937.[44] In line with the new soviet electoral system, Zhdanov called for conducting party committee elections the same way: contested voting by secret ballot. Although his speech did not focus on the situation outside the party, his talk of elections in general raised a sore point with the party secretaries in the audience.

1998); and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999), chap. 7. On rumors in Stalinist society see L. Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare—Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside," *Journal of Modern History* 62 (December 1990); and Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 166–83.

[42]Baulim letter to A. Ia. Iakovlev, 4 April 1937, RGASPI, f. 17, op 123, d. 1, ll. 34–35.

[43]V. P. Danilov and Roberta T. Manning, eds., *Tragediia sovetskoi derevnii*, vol. 5, (Moscow, forthcoming 2002).

[44]"Doklad t. Zhdanova," *Voprosy istorii*, 1993, no. 5:3–23.

The party and state leaders of every major region and republic were members of the Central Committee. Therefore, the colloquy at this plenum constitutes a kind of ritualized dialogue between regional and central party leaders. Normally, at the conclusion of a main report to a Central Committee plenum, speakers would register with the presidium to speak in the "discussion." Typically, that discussion repeated the main points of the report and praised the speaker for proposing "absolutely correct" solutions. But the February-March 1937 plenum was not a normally scripted performance. Things had already gone off the rails in the first four days of the meeting when Bukharin and Rykov had failed to confess to the accusations against them, and when a special plenum commission had split on the question of their punishment. The ritual was so damaged that the published version of the plenum had to be doctored to pretend that the meeting had begun on 27 February (instead of 23 February) in order to disguise the confusion of the first four days.[45]

When Zhdanov finished speaking about "party democracy," nobody registered or rose to speak! This had not happened in many years. A. A. Andreev, chairing the meeting, announced in despair, "I don't have anyone registered. Somebody has to register." M. F. Shkiriatov wryly noted, "The orators have to prepare themselves." Robert Eikhe, of Western Siberia, whined, "I can't; I'm not ready. I will speak tomorrow." Stalin pressed for someone to say something, "We need [at least] a provisional conclusion." Finally, E. M. Iaroslavskii spoke up, "I ask to be registered." A delighted and relieved Stalin said, "There! Iaroslavskii!"[46]

Head of the League of the Militant Atheists, Iaroslavskii then held forth on religion. Zhdanov's speech had mentioned the weakness of antireligious propaganda only in passing, as a typical failure of party work. But Iaroslavskii's remarks gave the party secretaries a chance to complain about their problems in the countryside and to warn of the danger of the new electoral system, all in the context of "discussing" Zhdanov's speech (which according to accepted formula they nevertheless praised). Party secretaries had for years blamed shortcomings in their regions on "contamination" (*zasorenie*) by anti-Soviet elements.[47] They now warned that the new electoral system gave anti-Soviet elements "new possibilities to harm us" and would see attempts by enemies to "conduct attacks against us, to organize a struggle against us."[48] S. V. Kosior complained that thousands of religious believers were attending religious-political "events" to cynically praise Stalin for their new rights. Kosior went on to complain of "awful wildness, conservatism ... fanatical religious sentiments that feed undisguised hatred of Soviet power."[49]

Other speakers made more direct warnings, using language that would appear in Order No. 447. One noted that "we have a series of facts that harmful elements from the remnants of the former kulaks and clergy, especially mullahs, are conducting work among remnant groups and preparing for the elections. ... It is clear that it is necessary to carry out a decisive

[45]Compare the published version ("Stenograficheskii otchet," RGASPI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 612, vols. 1 and 2), which omits the first four days of the meeting, with the fuller version in *Voprosy istorii*, 1992, nos. 2–12. For an account of the commission split see Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*, 406–19.

[46]*Voprosy istorii*, 1993, no. 5:14.

[47]See Steven Merritt, "The Great Purges in the Soviet Far East, 1937–1938" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 2000).

[48]*Voprosy istorii*, 1993, no. 5:18 (Vareikis); ibid., no. 6:5, 6 (Eikhe).

[49]Ibid., no. 6:8 (Kosior).

struggle against these elements."[50] Another observed that "kulak elements, priests, sons of priests, sons of [tsarist] policemen ... according to the new Constitution received electoral rights. They can vote. It seems to me that here we have to pay particular attention to the changes arising in the population which have gone on in each province."[51]

The Bolsheviks' fear of religion was real. The 1930s were a time of privation and severe social stress, and in such times people often gravitate to movements or ideas that involve salvation, improvement, release, and opposition to the status quo. Russian religious movements, both Orthodox and sectarian, promised all these. After all, religion was the other millenarian idea competing with communism for the hearts and minds of the population. Like communism, it was the other encompassing set of beliefs that sought to explain the world and that promised salvation in the long run. Despite relentless persecution by the Bolsheviks that included closing churches and mass arrests of priests, religion was still a potent force in Soviet society in the 1930s. Iaroslavskii had reported that thirty-nine thousand religious organizations were legally registered with more than a million "activists." He noted that data from the recently completed 1937 census was still incomplete, but cited several provinces where 50-80 percent of the population were "believers." In some places, Orthodox cantors were elected to collective farm chairmanships instead of Communists.[52] In the 1937 census, soon to be denounced and suppressed, 56 million people (some 57 percent of the adult population) declared themselves to be religious believers. Worse still, of those between the ages of 20 and 29—the postrevolutionary generation on which the Bolsheviks pinned such hopes—45 percent declared themselves believers.[53] It is certainly open to question whether Bolshevism commanded as much or as fervent support in the population, and Bolsheviks worried that the new freedom of religion promised in the constitution would provide a cover for antiregime political organizing and propaganda.

M. I. Kalinin, chairman of the Central Executive Committee of Soviets (TsIK) was ultimately responsible for organizing the new elections, and when he rose to speak to the February–March 1937 plenum, the party secretaries gave him a hard time. Even before he spoke, some members had requested that the campaign period for the elections be extended to give them more time to prepare competitive party candidates.[54] Kalinin began by noting that an electoral law would soon be promulgated by the government. Eikhe interrupted him, "But we are asking that we be brought into this business." Others then plied Kalinin with technical questions about the voting and ridiculed his answers. When Kalinin said the system would resemble the "French system of elections," P. P. Postyshev quipped, "Now it's all clear, we have a lot of Frenchmen here," drawing bitter laughter from the party secretaries. Several of them asked that, instead of merely having the electoral law confirmed at the TsIK session, it be circulated in advance for their comment and corrections. Kalinin agreed, but shot back at one of his critics, "Eikhe came here and wanted to overthrow everything; [by

[50]Ibid., 23–24 (Mirzoian).
[51]Ibid., 27 (Kabakov).
[52]Ibid., no. 5:14–15.
[53]Iurii A. Poliakov, *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1937 g.* (Moscow, 1991), 106–15.
[54]*Voprosi istorii*, 1993, no. 6:15 (Khataevich).

saying] there is no electoral law. (Eikhe: This is pressure, Mikhail Ivanovich.) Kalinin: Of course I'm pressuring you. I think that you have every possibility for full preparations."[55]

Virtually everyone who spoke critically at the plenum about the new electoral system in the countryside was a leading territorial party secretary (Bogushevskii, Vareikis, Kosior, Eikhe, Khataevich, Mirzoian, Kabakov, Postyshev). As these warnings and critical remarks continued into the evening, the chair of the meeting (Andreev) finally put a stop to it: "Comrades, before giving the floor to another comrade, I must warn that several of the orators are speaking off the subject ... the speakers are ignoring the question of democratization within the party; this is wrong."[56] After this, speakers returned to a more traditional and narrow discussion of Zhdanov's speech.

But their fears that the elections would aid and comfort "dangerous" forces in the countryside did not abate. Over the next few months local party leaders did everything they could within the limits of party discipline (and sometimes outside it) to stall or change the elections. They sent warnings to the center about priests and fascists being elected. They dragged their feet about organizing electoral districts, propaganda, meetings, and other elements of the electoral campaign, deliberately avoiding their orders on the subject. Their resistance brought rebukes and warnings from the Central Committee, which ordered local party leaders to work harder with "political work" to overcome resistance peacefully and make the elections a success.[57] On one occasion, Stalin personally wrote to S. V. Kosior in Ukraine, reminding him that all elections were to be by secret ballot.[58]

Stalin was not yet willing to retreat from contested elections, and on 2 July 1937, *Pravda* no doubt disappointed the regional secretaries by publishing the first installment of the new electoral rules, enacting and enforcing contested, universal, secret ballot elections.[59] But Stalin offered a compromise. The very same day the electoral law was published, the Politburo approved the launching of a mass operation against precisely the elements the local leaders had complained about, and hours later Stalin sent his telegram to provincial party leaders ordering the kulak operation.[60] It is hard to avoid the conclusion that in return for forcing the local party leaders to conduct an election, Stalin chose to help them win it by giving them license to kill or deport hundreds of thousands of "dangerous elements."

Contemporaries also saw a link between the elections and the mass operations. Jailhouse informers in Tataria reported that those arrested in the mass operations thought that the Bolsheviks were afraid of the elections and had launched a preemptive strike from concern that enemies would seize control of the voting in the districts.[61] Nikolai Bukharin, who was better placed to judge such things, praised mass terror in his last letter to Stalin, noting that a general purge was in part connected with "the transition to democracy."[62] Three months

[55]Ibid., 16–17.

[56]Ibid., no. 7:11 (Andreev).

[57]See Getty, "State and Society," 18–36.

[58]Stalin to Kosior, 20 March 1937, RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 56, l. 31.

[59]Stalin gave up on contested elections only in the autumn of 1937 (Getty, "State and Society," 31–32).

[60]"Polozhenie o vyborakh Verkhovnyi Sovet SSSR," *Pravda*, 2 July 1937; "Ob antisovetskikh elementakh," Politburo resolution of 2 July 1937, *Trud*, 4 June 1992.

[61]Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu*, 14.

[62]For Bukharin's letter see *Istochnik*, 1993/0, 23–25; and an English version in Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*, 556–60.

later, in October, speakers at a Central Committee plenum would respond to Molotov's report on electoral preparations with comments on the mass operations. First Secretary Kontorin of Arkhangelsk said, "We asked and will continue to ask the Central Committee to increase our limits for the first category [executions] in connection with preparations for the elections."[63]

There are other signs of a local role in the instigation of the kulak operation. Five days before Stalin's July telegram the Politburo had approved the formation of an ad hoc troika in Western Siberia "to apply the supreme penalty to all activists belonging to this insurrectionary organization of deported kulaks." This had not happened in several years, and the words "insurrectionary organization of deported kulaks" would coincide with the language of Stalin's subsequent telegram a few days later. In the past such troikas had been formed in response to local requests, and it is possible that a request from Western Siberia First Secretary Robert Eikhe (a leading critic of the new electoral scheme) provided a catalyst for Stalin's 3 July 1937 telegram.[64]

The July decision to launch the kulak operation seems to have been taken suddenly, without much forethought, preparation, or planning. A series of quick incremental steps over a few days (Eikhe's troikas, Stalin's telegram, preliminary instructions, and finally Order No. 447), one following and sometimes contradicting the other, resulted in the kulak operation. Policymaking by impromptu and improvised process was not unusual for Stalin's leadership. The Politburo had, after all, staggered step by step in the late 1920s from limiting the kulaks to full collectivization in similar fashion.

If we turn our attention to the implementation of the kulak mass operation, we see signs of contradiction and indecision, along with interplay between center and periphery that hardly suggests simple centralization or one-way flow of influence. As we have seen, Stalin's telegram ordered local officials to propose numbers of persons to be shot or exiled to distant regions and was followed on 31 July by Ezhov's formal NKVD Order No. 447 providing the operational details. The four-week interim between them might be attributed to usual Soviet inefficiency, but a closer look at the events of the intervening four weeks suggests other factors at work.

In response to Stalin's telegram, most provinces and national republics sent in figures, which the Politburo approved between 5 and 11 July. The regional leaders were prepared to submit precise numbers; they already knew exactly who they wanted to repress. Thus the Chuvash ASSR quickly asked for permission to shoot precisely 86 kulaks and 54 criminals and to exile 676 kulaks and 201 criminals. Cheliabinsk proposed to shoot 2,552 and exile 5401. In Moscow, First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev knew that he needed to repress exactly 41,805 kulaks and criminals. Nearly all of the submissions from the forty provinces and republics responding to Stalin's telegram were in such exact figures.[65]

But suddenly on 12 July, Deputy NKVD Commissar M. P. Frinovskii sent an urgent telegram to all local police agencies: "Do not begin the operation to repress former kulaks.

[63]Plenum TsK VKP(b) 11–12 oktiabria 1937 g., stenogramma, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 2, d. 625, ll. 1–10, 38, 49, 55, 63, 70.

[64]"O vskrytoi v Zap. Sibire k.-r. povstanicheskoi organizatsii sredi vyslannykh kulakov," Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 89, op. 43, d. 48, l. 1. We have not located such a request in the archives.

[65]Politburo protocols (*osobye papki*), RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 21, ll. 94–99.

I repeat, do not begin." Frinovskii went on to say that the precise date for beginning the operation would be communicated "later" by a "special order of the commissar." Even the "most active and embittered" kulaks were not to be sent to the troikas, sentenced, or shot until further orders from Ezhov. Frinovskii ordered all provincial NKVD chiefs to attend a series of conferences to be held in Moscow, the first to begin only three days later.[66] Thus, two weeks after Stalin's telegram, procedures were not in place for the operation, and the NKVD apparently feared that local authorities would start shooting without them.

These operational conferences took place in Moscow on 16–18 July. We do not have records of what happened there, and subsequent archival declassifications may change our view radically, but five significant differences between Stalin's telegram and Order No. 447 four weeks later appeared during the time of the conferences and may suggest some kind of interchange between central and local officials. First, Stalin's telegram had identified kulaks and criminals who had "returned home at the completion of their sentences." But after the conferences with local leaders, Order No. 447 greatly expanded the list to include priests and sectarians, members of "anti-Soviet" political parties, fascists, former White Army officers, tsarist-era bureaucrats (*chinovniki*) and policemen, spies, terrorists, bandits, criminal recidivists, and even horse thieves. Second, the list was no longer confined to those returning home after their sentences, as Stalin had specified. Order No. 447 targeted escapees, criminal elements still in exile and camp, and "those previously avoiding punishment." Third, although Stalin's telegram had suggested exile for "less dangerous elements," Order No. 447 called instead for them to be sent to hard regime labor camps.

Fourth, the target numbers submitted previously by the local authorities were revised, most often downward. It seems the Politburo had second thoughts about the locally proposed numbers they had just approved, and proceeded to lower more than half of them. It will be remembered that at the beginning of July, 40 of 64 provinces and national republics had submitted target numbers in response to Stalin's telegram. Altogether, these local suggestions had totaled 207,345 proposed arrests. At the end of July, and after the conferences with local representatives, Order No. 447 reduced this forty-province total by about 20,000 arrests, to 187,450. Of the reductions, 95 percent (18,770) were of the category slated for execution. Of the 40 provinces proposing targets in response to Stalin's telegram, Order No. 447 reduced the number to be shot in 19 provinces, raised it for 17 and left it the same for 4. It reduced the number to be sent to camp for 22 and raised it for 18. Some of the reductions of local proposals for execution were dramatic: Belorussia from 3,000 to 1,000, Azov-Black Sea from 6,600 to 5,000, West Siberia from 11,000 to 5,000, and Moscow from 8,500 to 5,000.[67] There are rumors that some provincial NKVD chiefs resisted the setting of high limits at the July conferences in Moscow, and we know that Stalin and his henchmen frequently pressed for "intensification of the struggle against enemies."[68] But other local

[66]"Memorandum No. 299," TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 5, l. 273. Frinovskii referred to "Directive No. 266 of the Peoples' Commissar" (Ezhov), which his memorandum was to "supplement." At present, we do not have the referenced Ezhov Directive No. 266 mentioned by Frinovskii.

[67]Based on comparison of the limits first approved by the Politburo (Politburo protocols, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 21, ll. 94–99); and the targets specified in Order No. 447 (TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 1, ll. 203–17).

[68]Mikhail Shreider, *NKVD iznutri: Zapiski chekista* (Moscow, 1995), 42. Shreider's account is secondhand and is probably not entirely accurate. He reports that Omsk NKVD chief Salyn' openly protested the setting of target

officials did not need to be pressed. In July 1937 many of them proposed repression targets *higher* than those the Politburo was ultimately willing to accept.

Fifth, Order No. 447 seemed to establish limits rather than quotas.[69] A careful reading of Order No. 447 shows that the target numbers were limits (*limity*), suggesting maximums more than minimums.[70] If the Politburo had at this moment expected or wanted an open-ended campaign-style terror, there would be no reason to mention limits at all. Although the *limity* were said to be only *orientirovochnye*, Ezhov's order warned local officials that they "do not have the right independently to raise them. ... In such cases, they are obligated to present me with an appropriate justification. Decreasing the figures ... is permitted." If the Politburo wanted a wider terror beyond the limits it prescribed, such statements would have been counterproductive. Instead, Stalin and Ezhov felt it necessary to issue warnings to the contrary and insist on their right to control the terror. Reflecting Stalin's concern that locals might go out of control (or out of *his* control), Order No. 447 twice warned that any "excesses" in local implementation of the operation were not permitted. Stalin wanted to have his cake and eat it too: to have a centrally managed campaign and avoid paying the price that campaigns carried.

Lacking transcripts of these conferences on Order No. 447, we can only guess at the reasons for these differences between Stalin's telegram and the subsequent order. It does seem clear, however, that the process involved something quite different from the simple imposition of a prepared central plan. It seems unlikely that sometime in the ten days, 2–12 July, Stalin suddenly decided to greatly *expand* the targeted categories and increase the punishments while at the same time *reducing* the proposed number of arrests and placing limits on them. Based on the evidence we now have, it seems much more logical to consider one of two different scenarios for the changes adopted. Perhaps Ezhov, who drafted Order No. 447, pushed for more severe punishments of broader categories of victims. Or, it could have been that local representatives suggested expanding the categories and punishments. Stalin agreed, but was afraid that, given their track record, the local leaders would spin the thing out of control, producing the familiar contradictions of campaigns: loss of his control by ceding too much power to local authorities and the total destruction of any plans for a centralized legal order. Two of the changes, as we have seen, limited local prerogatives by lowering target figures and imposing limits that had to be approved. In this scenario, Stalin approved a mass operation against broader targets, but in return insisted on reducing many of the locally proposed targets and on his right to approve, for each province, the size of the operation.

There were several reasons why regional party and police officials would support, or at least not oppose, mass repressive operations in their territories in mid-1937. Whatever local

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figures, to which Ezhov reacted by arresting him at the meeting itself. In fact, Salyn' was not removed from office for several days and not arrested for several weeks. See N. V. Petrov and K. V. Skorkin, eds., *Kto rukovodil NKVD, 1934–1941: Spravochnik* (Moscow, 1999), 373–37.

[69]In all the documents on the kulak operation I have seen, the word *limit* was used, rather than *kvota*, *norma*, or other terms suggesting minimum quotas.

[70]Most often they appear in the literature as "quotas." See, for example, Khlevniuk, "Objectives," 162–63, although the Russian version retains *limity* (O. V. Khlevniuk, *Politbiuro: mekhanizmy politicheskoi vlasti v 1930-e gody* [Moscow, 1996], 190–91).

chiefs may have thought previously, Stalin's telegram signaled new repression and many of them must have imagined that the Politburo would look with favor if they proposed huge numbers. During this period, Ezhov was also replacing the former provincial NKVD chiefs with those who believed, as he did, that the hunt for enemies had to be accelerated, although they may have been surprised at Stalin's and Ezhov's relative caution. Another reason for the locals' "enthusiasm" was self-insurance. By this time, suspicion was beginning to fall on members of the party apparatus as the NKVD cast its net wider and wider for "enemies of the people." The definition of that category was fluid and contested as various political actors sought to define "enemy" in ways convenient and safe for them.[71] It is not hard to imagine territorial party leaders pressing to identify "kulaks and criminals" as the chief enemies, in order to distract attention from their own failures and, again, to use violence as a substitute for administration.

In Order No. 447, Stalin and Ezhov prescribed detailed procedures and insisted on retaining ongoing approval authority. But perhaps the most important decision was left outside central control and in local hands: who would live and who would die, reversing the rules of the preceding years, when the Politburo had approved all death sentences. Now, local troikas composed of party and police officials had the right to try and execute "in expedited fashion," and only had to report to NKVD chief Ezhov every two weeks on the quantity and characteristics of those arrested and sentenced.[72] Central attempts to meaningfully monitor the situation were bound to fail.

Stalin must have known that, in the climate of rising hysteria about enemies, the *limity* in Order No. 447 would likely be taken as targets by the locals. In order to display their vigilance, they would surely request increases, and throughout the remainder of 1937 and into 1938, local party and police officials did in fact requested augmentations of their limits. The Politburo approved many (but not all) of them despite its earlier conservatism on local requests. Clearly, Stalin was not a reluctant terrorist and did not seek to reduce the terror, but rather to monitor local conduct of the campaign and reserve to himself the right to decide its parameters. But the process of increasing limits soon displayed the typical disarray of a Stalinist campaign. Order No. 447 specified that only NKVD Commissar Ezhov had the right to adjust them, but almost immediately the Politburo got into the act, approving requests from provincial party and police officials for increases in the limits. By the end of August secret protocols of Politburo meetings carry approvals of increased limits that, according to procedure, the NKVD should have been able to give.[73] At the same time, we know that Ezhov also was approving increases and that Stalin was doing so personally. Local party leaders often wrote directly to Stalin asking for augmented limits, bypassing Ezhov and the established procedure altogether. We have notes in Stalin's hand approving increases of limits for Krasnoiarsk , Bashkiria, Smolensk, and Engel's which do not appear in the Politburo records.[74]

[71]Getty and Naumov, *Road to Terror*.

[72]Examples of these reports can be found in Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu*.

[73]For examples of Politburo "special folder" confirmation of local requests to raise the limits see RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 21, ll. 162, 169, 174, and d. 22, ll. 6, 12, 13, 24.

[74]*Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992; RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 65, l. 88, 97. The Stalin memorandum on Krasnoiarsk carried the postscript "Za [voting yes], I. Stalin, V. Molotov." The ones for Smolensk and Engel's carry

The lack of clarity in the limit approval process is one of the important lacunae in our knowledge of the mass operations. Was Ezhov authorized to approve increases without the Politburo's or Stalin's confirmation? Why were some increases run through the Politburo and others not? Did Ezhov or Stalin give oral approvals that never found their way into the archives? Did the Politburo approve increases forwarded to them by Stalin or Ezhov without leaving written trace? Are there written approvals extant in other archives not available to researchers today?

We also know little about precisely how the operation was conducted and who was arrested. We know that special NKVD operational groups were formed, each with a geographical territory to sweep, but we know little about how victims actually were chosen. There are hints that local police surveillance records were combed for known class enemies, dissidents, and anti-Soviet elements. We suspect that criminal records were sifted for names. Interrogations, brief as they were, produced new names. In some places the choice was entirely capricious. In Turkmenistan, men with beards were taken, perhaps on the assumption that they were Muslim mullahs, and marketplaces were randomly swept.[75]

We have fragmentary evidence about the composition of those arrested. In Omsk, excerpted protocols from troika sessions indicate that political labels were attached to most of the accused, who were often grouped into organizations: names of "insurrectionary kulak organizations," secret religious brotherhoods, unions of White Army officers, Mensheviks, SRs, and various Trotskyist-terrorist groups are frequently encountered along with individual criminals, nationalists, spies, and wreckers. Political labels were attached to the vast majority of victims.[76] Although these labels perhaps bear little relation to reality, they show the sharp political spin put on the dragnet and the eagerness of local officials to describe group conspiracies, no doubt in response to Ezhov's demand for such descriptions. The few reports we have from local NKVD organizations to Moscow use considerable space to describe the various groups they "uncovered."[77] Aside from the political labels, however, the protocols often mention the residence or occupation of the arrested. This anecdotal evidence gives the strong impression of rural categories of politically "alien elements:" kulaks, former White officers, religious leaders and sectarians along with common criminals.

A rough breakdown we have of those arrested comes from the Tatar SSR. It groups victims into categories in use at the time rather than by specific accusation and may therefore give a slightly better, if flawed, picture of rough proportions.

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the Stalin note "Za." This was the format for drafts circulated to Politburo members for their vote, and frequently appear in the archival "Politburo materials" (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 163) and then in the Politburo protocols (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3 [PB protocols] or op. 162 [PB special folders]). In this case, however, there is no record of these documents in either location. Stalin's notation for Bashkiria also seems to have bypassed the Politburo, reading simply "Comrade Ezhov. We have to increase both categories."

[75]See the 1939 report in GARF, f. 8131, op. 27, d. 145 ll. 49–57.

[76]V. M. Samosudov, *Bol'shoi terror v Omskom Priirtysh'e, 1937–1938* (Omsk, 1998), consists largely of summaries and extracts from troika protocols.

[77]See, for example, the report to Ezhov: "Dokladnaia zapiska ob itogakh massovykh operatsii provedennykh po linii UGB Tatarskoi ASSR," January 1938, in Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu*, 86–117. Most of this report consists of descriptions of various enemy organizations.

Victims of the Kulak Operation: Tatar ASSR

Composition of convicted	Percent of total arrests	Total arrested	Number shot	Number sent to camp	Percent shot
Former kulaks	56.1	3009	1218	1791	40.4
Former [tsarist period] jailers, Whites, policemen, gendarmes, etc.	19.5	1043	569	474	54.3
Criminal elements	14.0	756	350	406	46.2
Orthodox and Muslim clergy, churchmen and sectarians	6.9	370	281	89	75.9
SRs and members of other anti-Soviet political parties	2.7	150	137	13	91.3
Participants in nationalist counter-revolutionary organizations	0.6	34	15	19	44.1
Total		5362	2570	2792	47.9

"Dokladnaia zapiska ob itogakh massovykh operatsiiprovedennykh po linii UGB Tatarskoi ASSR," January 1938, in Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu: Iz istorii politicheskikh repressii v TASSR v gody "ezhovshchiny"* (Kazan, 1999), 86.

These proportions executed are roughly comparable to the national average (50.4 percent of all those arrested) and the relative sizes of the categories are not dramatically different from anecdotal evidence elsewhere. These data confirm that arrests were made by category, by biography, rather than based on any action or crime by the victim. They show that kulaks (or those so labelled) were the clear majority of victims in this mass operation, while purported members of religious organizations or political parties were far more likely to be executed than others.

Based on the sources now available (which are probably incomplete) we can say that with Order No. 447 plus subsequent known limit increases, Moscow gave permission to shoot about 236,000 victims. We are fairly certain that some 386,798 persons were actually shot, leaving 151,716 people shot without currently documented central sanction either from the NKVD or the Politburo.[78] The possibility exists that local authorities went far beyond the permitted limits, especially when it came to shooting victims. In Turkmenistan, for example, where we happen to have full data on all approvals, we know that the Politburo approved 3,225 executions, but local authorities shot 4,037, an excess of 25 percent over approved limits.[79] In Smolensk, archival research shows an approved limit of 4,000, but local authorities are known to have shot 4,500 and continued shooting victims even after the November 1938 decision ordered them to stop. They simply backdated the paperwork and

[78]Calculated from Politburo protocols (special folders): RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, dd. 21–23; TsA FSB, collection of documents; Kokurin and Petrov, *GULAG*, 97–104; Samosudov, *Bol'shoi terror*, 160–61, 241; Nikolai Il'kevich, "Rasstreliany v Viaz'me: Novoe o M. N. Goretskom," *Krai Smolenskii* 1–2 (1994): 129–44; Shearer, "Crime and Social Disorder," 139–41; *Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992; *Izvestiia*, 3 April 1996; and Khlevniuk, "Les mechanismes," 204–6. Nikita Petrov believes that additional increase permissions were given orally or by telegrams and puts the excess shooting figure at about thirty thousand (personal communication). Such evidence is not currently available to researchers.

[79]See Khlevniuk, "Les mechanismes," 204.

continued shooting.[80] Some regional party chiefs were enthusiastic about the mass operations. First Secretary Simochkin in Ivanovo liked to watch the shootings and was curious about why some of his subordinates chose not to.[81] In Turkmenistan, First Secretary Chubin was so involved with the mass killings that in 1938 he tried to secure the recall of a new NKVD chief sent to stop them.[82]

The records we have of approved increases in limits are usually just that: approvals. The Politburo folders do not record instances in which local requests for higher repression limits were denied, although we know that sometimes they were. In August 1937 an NKVD letter refused a requested increase for Iaroslavl.[83] In January 1938, Tataria NKVD chief Mikhailov reported to Ezhov that "data show that the narrow limits in the early period of the operation for those deserving repression delayed the development of the operation." He asked Ezhov for permission to double the execution limits in Tataria. Ezhov refused.[84] In Smolensk, NKVD chief Karutskii asked Ezhov for permission to triple the execution limits. Ezhov demurred until Smolensk party First Secretary Korotchenko backed up Karutskii's request with a letter explaining the situation in the province.[85]

Stalin certainly encouraged zeal in the hunt for "enemies of the people." Both directly and through Ezhov he pressed for more and more arrests and he approved requests for increased limits. At the same time, he reserved the center's right to approve those limits. Despite his murderous encouragement, after spending several years trying to secure his regional subordinates' obedience to his commands, there is no reason to believe that he expected to be disobeyed or that he wanted the locals to exceed instructions. We do not have at our disposal a single document suggesting that he encouraged or planned for local "spontaneity" that went beyond his permission, and quite a few suggesting the contrary, beginning with the limits and restrictions against "excesses" and procedures in Order No. 447.[86]

Stalin and Ezhov were not always happy with the way local authorities carried out the kulak operation. In February 1938, Ezhov sent a letter to the NKVD leadership in Ukraine "and elsewhere" congratulating his subordinates on good work in arresting spies and observing that things were going generally well, but noting some "mistakes and serious shortcomings" in local NKVD operations.[87] Locals tended to run up the score by persecuting large numbers of small fry (who could, after all, vote) rather than mounting serious investigation of "counterrevolutionary leaders." It is no good, Ezhov wrote, to focus on petty religious sectarians from the 1920s, on those exhibiting anti-Soviet moods or remarks, on rank and file White Army veterans, while leaving the "leading cadres" untouched. The targets should be not former White Army soldiers, but their officers; not harmless sectarians, but their priests. And above all, blind sweeps without any investigation or focus were wrong. He chided local NKVD operatives for ignoring Central Committee directives to the

[80]See Manning, "Massovaia operatsiia," 239–41; and Il'kevich, "Rasstreliany v Viaz'me," 138.
[81]Shreider, *NKVD iznutri*, 80.
[82]Khlevniuk, "Les mechanismes," 203.
[83]Danilov and Manning, *Tragediia*.
[84]Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu*, 117.
[85]Manning, "Massovaia operatsiia," 240–41.
[86]For another view, in which spontaneous excesses were part of a Stalin plan, see Khlevniuk, "Objectives," 167.
[87]TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 6, ll. 4–12.

contrary and arresting people simply because they were former party members or because they happened to have been among the 2.5 million prisoners of the Germans during World War I. "This should not in any case be done." "It is wrong to quickly and formally fulfill the limit by arresting everybody involved."

Ezhov accused the NKVD operational groups of taking the easy route: delivering "heavy blows" on districts conveniently located near their headquarters while ignoring anti-Soviet groups further out in countryside. The locals, on the other hand, preferred to catch up everyone in the net in the nearby districts where "anti-Soviet elements" were the biggest nuisance for them.[88]

All in all, the kulak operation of 1937–38 was hardly a model of planned efficiency, and the center's detailed orders were often disregarded. Soon after it began, it was necessary for Moscow NKVD chiefs to issue more telegrams clarifying procedures.[89] According to Order No. 447, the operation was to begin with those to be executed, followed by a second stage encompassing those to be sent to camps. In the event, regional troikas sentenced victims to both categories simultaneously.[90] Order No. 447 had forbidden the persecution of families of those arrested; in the event, troikas did this frequently.[91] In fact, almost every restriction Order No. 447 had placed on local conduct of the operation was violated in its implementation. Given that local authorities decided how many would be repressed, who would live and who would die, it is difficult to agree that everything was planned and administered from Moscow. Senior NKVD official Stanislav Redens said at a January 1938 NKVD conference, perhaps with some resignation, that the Moscow NKVD was able to give only "general directions" because regional secret police organizations acted "independently."[92]

The operation lasted not the mandated four months but fifteen, and in some places the shootings continued after the 17 November 1938 orders halting them and insisting on

[88]Although the evidence on this point is only suggestive, Ezhov may have transformed "limits" into "quotas" for provinces and even districts within them. Molotov recalled that "Ezhov was accused because he began to name quantities [of arrests] by provinces, and in the provinces numbers by district. In some provinces they had to liquidate not less than two thousand, in some district not less than fifty people. ... That is what he was shot for. There was no monitoring over it." See Feliks Ivanovich Chuev and Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: Iz dnevnika F. Chueva* (Moscow, 1991), 399. Other evidence suggests that Ezhov faced criticism for his handling of the mass operations. In one of his notebooks recording Politburo criticism of his leadership of the NKVD, the words "mass operations" appear twice, unfortunately without elaboration (RGASPI, f. 671, op. 1, d. 271).

[89]Thus, another telegram, "Supplementing Operational Order No. 447," from Deputy NKVD chief Frinovskii, warned local police: "Sentences of condemned persons can be announced [to them] only for the second category [sentences to camp]. Do not announce [death sentences] of the first category [to the accused]. I repeat, do not announce" (Memorandum No. 247 of the Secretariat, Narkom NKVD, TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 5, l. 275).

[90]See, for example, the breakdowns for Omsk in Samosudov, *Bol'shoi terror*, 160–61, 241; and in Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu*, 51–55, 71–74.

[91]The Politburo had authorized persecution of families of oppositionists and of "enemies of the people" convicted by Military Tribunals and Military Collegia, but not under the kulak operation of Order No. 447. See Politburo resolution "Vopros NKVD" of 24 May 1937, RGASPI, f. 17, op. 162, d. 21, l. 45; and "Operativnyi prikaz No. 486: Ob operatsii po repressirovaniiu zhen i detei izmennikov rodiny," 15 August 1937, TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 1, ll. 224–35. These harsh regulations were softened already in 1938. See "Tsirkuliar NKVD SSSR No. 106: O detiakh repressirovannykh roditelei," 20 May 1938, ibid., ll. 248; and "Prikaz NKVD SSSR No. 689: O poriadke aresta zhen izmennikov rodiny," 17 October 1938, ibid., ll. 258–59.

[92]TsA FSB, collection of documents.

procuratoral sanction for all arrests.[93] More than a week after that, Ezhov's successor Beria was still issuing decrees to local NKVD offices to "immediately stop all mass operations" and repeating the strictures of the 17 November 1938 orders limiting the NKVD to individual arrests with procuratorial sanction.[94] Fully six months after that, USSR Procurator Vyshinskii complained to Stalin and Molotov that the NKVD still made arrests without that sanction.[95]

From the Politburo's point of view, this was certainly a blind terror. Like a psychotic mass killer who begins shooting in all directions, the Stalinist center had little idea who would be killed. It opened fire on vague targets, giving local officials license to kill whomever they saw fit. The opposite of controlled, planned, directed fire, the mass operations were more like blind shooting into a crowd. The Stalinist regime resembled not so much a disciplined army as a poorly trained and irregular force of Red Cavalry, and the aftermath resembled the chaos of a battlefield, where the casualties bore only accidental resemblance to the originally intended victims both in number and type.

It is tempting to see the mass operations as part of a Stalinist plan for population policy or social engineering on a vast scale. Going beyond the modernist state's usual efforts to map, standardize, and enumerate society in order to control it, "authoritarian high-modernist states," to use James Scott's terminology, take the next step and use large-scale, concerted force to impose "legibility, appropriation, and centralization of control."[96] Seen this way, the mass operations would be a deliberate "modernist" attempt to cultivate society by weeding out or excising alien or infected elements by killing them or removing them permanently from the body social. On the other hand, as we have seen, the mass operations were unplanned, ad hoc reactions to a perceived immediate political threat. Rather than a thought-out policy, modernist or otherwise, they recalled instead the Civil War reflex: a violent recourse to terror—hostage-taking and mass shootings—in the face of an enemy offensive. Indeed, they interrupted the ongoing policy of judicial reengineering. Despite the detailed operational plan (which was, of course, drawn up at the last minute and promptly ignored),

[93]The mass operations were formally halted on 17 November 1938 by a joint order of the Politburo and the Council of People's Commissars, signed by Stalin and Molotov ("O prokurature SSSR," *Moskovskie novosti*, 21 June 1992). Accompanying directives restored procuratorial sanction for all arrests ("Iz protokola No. 65 zasedaniia Politbiuro TsK VKP[b]: Postanovlenie Soveta Narodnykh Komissarov SSSR i Tsentral'nogo Komiteta VKP[b]," RGASPI, f. 17, op. 3, d. 1003, ll. 85–87). The Politburo decision halting all troika cases and "other simplified procedures" had been taken in a 15 November 1938 secret resolution (ibid., op. 162, d. 24, l. 62).

[94]"Prikaz No. 762: O poriadke osushchestvleniia postanovleniia SNK SSSR I TsK VKP(b) ot 17 noiabria 1938 goda," 26 November 1938, TsA FSB, f. 100, op. 1, por. 1, ll. 260–64.

[95]Vyshinskii to Stalin and Molotov, 21 May 1939, RGASPI, f. 82, op. 2, d. 897, l. 28.

[96]James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, 1998). Scott discussses Stalinist collectivization in these terms, arguing that it failed because as a "centralized high modernist solution" it could not encompass the complexities and peculiarities of agriculture and thus failed both to achieve the state's goal of scientifically advanced farming or to put food on the table (pp. 193–222). Scott notes that other goals such as space exploration, transportation planning, flood control, or aircraft manufacturing were more susceptible to centralized high modernist treatments. On the other hand, it is not at all clear that these efforts differed from collectivization in degree of complexity. Collectivization *was* different from them insofar as it was implemented by a quasimilitary and violent campaign that produced more chaos than centralization or legibility in the end. It may be that efforts to achieve standardization, centralization, control, or concerted national effort are doomed to failure if implemented by their antithesis, a wild and uncontrollable military offensive whose wounds and arbitrariness last forever.

the mass operations were more spasm than policy, and too imprecise and locally arbitrary in their targets to constitute centralized social engineering.

We can only speculate about the ultimate reasons for the mass terror of 1937. Scholars have long thought that it flowed from Stalin's desire to preempt any possible "fifth column" behind the lines of the coming war.[97] But as we have also seen, fear that opposition in the countryside was reaching dangerous levels also played a role, and it was a purely domestic event (the 1937 electoral campaign) that sparked the terror. Much of Bolshevik policy was governed by their fears of opposition large and small.[98] It is not difficult to imagine that their paranoia could lead them to launch mass terror from fear of losing control of the countryside, as various anti-Soviet elements used the electoral campaign to organize themselves, spread their views, and spawn dangerous rumors. The foreign and domestic explanations are not mutually exclusive, and Stalin may well have seen the threatening opposition in the countryside as the seeds of wartime opposition.

We still often read that Stalin thought up his plans with no meaningful influence, constraint, or pressure from anyone else. Proofs continue to be adduced that he was the originator of every important regime initiative. He alone decided what to do and did it, and the outcome was as planned. One assumes that his wishes were always realized and, hypnotized by the strident and uncompromising language of his commands and threats, we rarely stop to wonder why it was necessary to be so threatening or to repeat the threats and commands so often. Even when the outcomes of his policies were dramatically different from what he ordered, we sometimes assume this was what he wanted anyway and the divergence is seen as another example of his exceeding cleverness or devious planning.[99] Writing history thus becomes little more than chronicling his plans and actions. Stalin's terror was almost incomprehensible in its scope and cruelty. But his policy was formulated and administered in complicated ways and, like other policies, can be studied without negating the dictator's role or responsibility.

The evidence presented here, although incomplete, suggests two possible conclusions. First, the mass terror operations of 1937–38 were unplanned and impromptu reactions to perceived immediate problems. Derailing existing policy on judicial reform and modernization that the regime had cultivated since 1933, they illustrate the unpredictability and incoherence of the Stalinist system. Unable to plan or to efficiently carry out any kind of operation,

[97]See Khlevniuk, *Politbiuro*, 194–98; Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (London, 1968), 373; and Joseph Edward Davies, *Mission to Moscow* (New York, 1941). Molotov made this point in his conversations with Feliks Chuev (Chuev and Molotov, *Sto sorok besed*, 390, 93, 413–14). Bukharin also connected the terror "with the prewar situation" (*Istochnik*, 1993/0, 23–25). Rumors among those arrested in the mass operations included the thought that war had started and the regime was neutralizing suspicious elements (Stepanov, *Rasstrel po limitu*, 14). On the other hand, the first steps were taken to stop the terror in autumn 1938, precisely when the Munich conference, the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the Polish crisis produced the most direct security threat to the USSR.

[98]Getty, "Afraid of Their Shadows."

[99]See G. T. Rittersporn, "New Horizons: Conceptualizing the Soviet 1930s," *Kritika* 2 (Spring 2001): 309–10, for a discussion of this point.

the Stalinists quickly issued detailed instructions that just as quickly became meaningless in the chaos of the campaign.[100] This was an operation in which central directives were violated or ignored and which left local officials in control. An anticipated four-month operation against escaped kulaks became a fifteen-month massacre of a wide variety of locally and randomly identified targets. The final result bore almost no relation to Stalin's original directive, and descriptions like "centralization" and "planning" seem inappropriate to characterize such a system.

Second, the genesis and development of these operations points to the importance of the structure of the system to an understanding of events. These terror campaigns had constituencies behind them outside of Moscow that saw them as suitable tools of Bolshevik administration. The documents we now have indicate a kind of dialectical relation between Stalin and peripheral officials in the mass terror operations. It is clear that to understand that system as a whole we must include the role of regional politicians which, in this case, seems to have been more than simple obedience or posing as more royalist than the king. Local authorities had their own interests that did not always coincide with Moscow's, and the relationship between center and periphery is crucial to the functioning (and dysfunction) of the system. It seems important "to examine the dictatorship as well as the Dictator."[101]

But here too, just as for Stalin's subordinates, the sphere in which he operated placed constraints on his choices. He needed local officials, even disobedient ones, to represent the regime and implement its policies out in the country. He needed to give them enough autonomy to do this, but without enough leeway to escape his authority or to go out of control and discredit the regime as a whole.[102] Despite his elevation to divine status, he had to listen to their views and take their needs into account. Stalin insisted on the right to endorse or disapprove their actions but dealt with information, structures, and events produced and often controlled by others.

Of course, at any point, Stalin could and did end the dialogue by deploying weapons such as forcing party discipline, organizing heuristic show trials of unlucky officials as lessons to the others or, in drastic cases, by removing or arresting subordinate politicians. Unable to secure precise implementation of precise directives, he could and did terrorize the administrators. This temporarily settled the contest but could not end the game. As Moshe Lewin observed, "purges, however bloody, were entirely useless as a method for changing bureaucracy's way of being ... physical elimination of officials did not eliminate the sociology of this layer."[103] Stalin could kill officeholders en masse, but he could not destroy the autonomous parts of their political spaces, because the same elements that created their power were constraints on his: geographic distance, poor communications, low educational levels, the imperatives of economic administration, and ancient Russian officeholding traditions of avoidance and blame-shifting played important roles. Stalin's own caprice and

[100]For a similar example of detailed instructions followed by chaos in an earlier mass operation see Lynne Viola, "A Tale of Two Men: Bergavinov, Tolmachev and the Bergavinov Commission," *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 8 (2000).

[101]Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (New York, 1998), xxviii.

[102]See Rittersporn, *Stalinist Simplifications*, for this argument in detail.

[103]Moshe Lewin, "Bureaucracy and the Stalinist State," in *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison*, ed. Lewin and Ian Kershaw (New York, 1997), 56, 65.

voluntarism were reproduced everywhere, and Bolshevik traditions glorifying plebeian defiance, mass action, and rule-breaking for a higher good conspired to create situations outside the center's control and to prevent the modernization of the Soviet state.